



Elizabeth Nunez

Biography

Showing her potential at an early age, nine year-old Elizabeth Nunez claimed the first place prize in the Trinidad Guardian newspaper's Tiny Tot's writing contest. She has been writing steadily since then, along the way leaving her native Trinidad, collecting multiple degrees from Marian College and New York University, and earning recognition and respect as both a writer and teacher.

Nunez has been balancing dual aspirations and careers since 1963, when she arrived in the United States at age 19 to earn a BA in English from Marian College in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. MA and Doctorate degrees in Literature from New York University followed, and Nunez began teaching at Medgar Evers College in 1972. Beginning her teaching career at the college a year after it was established, Nunez has been instrumental in developing the writing curriculum, which she continues to teach full time. Nunez's dedication to the school has earned her the title of CUNY Distinguished Professor of English.

In addition to her commitment to the academic life, Nunez has been writing steadily, publishing five novels since 1986. Her second novel, *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, won an IPPY Award- Independent Publishers Award for multicultural fiction, followed by an American Book Award for her third novel, *Bruised Hibiscus*. As editor of *Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 90's*, Nunez expanded her role in the literary world. She is dedicated to providing opportunities and exposure for black writers, which she has done through co-founding the National Black Writers Conference sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and chairing the PEN Open Book Committee, which provides writers of color with access to various aspects of the publishing industry.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1944
- * Trinidadian novelist and academic, currently living in the United States
- * Author of *Bruised Hibiscus*

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Major Critical Responses

Critics agree that Elizabeth Nunez's novels are "moving, powerful and haunting" (Johnson 20). In many of the reviews of Nunez's work the critics compliment her exploration of relationships through emotional writing. Carroll Denolyn of the *Black Issues Book Review* writes that Nunez "speaks to our propensity for self-delusion that cripples our relationships with ourselves and those we profess to care deeply about" (43). Camika Spencer agrees with Denolyn, stating that *Bruised Hibiscus* is "at times highly emotional and frequently relegates the reader to say things out loud either in protest or support" (Spencer 34).

Many critics point out that a common theme in Nunez's novels is the conflict of African or Caribbean and Western cultures. William Ferguson points to an example in *Grace*: Justin Peters is torn between his African heritage and his appreciation for classic Western literature. Sarah Towers illustrates, in her review of *Discretion*, Oufoula Sindede's conflict of two cultures: in Oufoula's "homeland, Africa, the myths and customs of his tribal ancestors" (9) make his desire for more than one wife acceptable. However, he was schooled by missionaries and as a result "grew up a Christian" (Towers 9). The conflict of his two cultures arises in the question: "What would it mean if he were to betray his Christian ethic and, like his father, embrace polygamy?" (Towers 9)

Nunez is also concerned with the "entanglements of race, class, and gender in heterogeneous and geographically limited society" (Giles 35). Critic Constance Johnson notes of *Bruised Hibiscus*: "Nunez covers a lot of terrain [in this book], from motherless daughters, racism, classism and religion to love and sex" (20). In *Grace*, one of the central struggles is between the main character, Justin Peters, who is a "Harvard graduate and professor of literature at a public college in Brooklyn," and his wife, Sally, "a Harlem-born poet-turned-elementary schoolteacher" (Denolyn 43). Sally "feels that she has lost touch with her authentic self" and Justin is criticized for his focus on the works of "Dead White Men" in his teaching (Denolyn 43). Both characters experience a change in how they identify themselves through systems of race and class. Eventually, the personal struggle affects their marriage. Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence* is a vaguely auto-biographical "coming-of-age story about a young girl who eventually leaves the West Indies, via scholarship, to attend college in Wisconsin" (Michal 49). The main character, Sara, is thrust into a new environment and is introduced to new ways of viewing herself and those around her in terms of race, class, and gender.



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Major Critical Responses continued

In the reviews, praise for her deep understanding and portrayal of emotion seems to predominate. However, a handful of the critics actually point out hindrances in Nunez's style. Sarah Towers of the *New York Times* and Camika Spencer of the *Mosaic Literary Magazine* point to problems they had with the books reviewed. Towers claims that in *Discretion*, Nunez writes the character Oufoula in a way that "has him sound like a broken record player" and this is a problem because "while such existential hashing and rehashing is true to the human mind, in an internal monologue it can be pretty dull" (Towers 9). Spencer also is caught in the repetitive nature of Nunez's writing. She notes that "The disappointing aspect of *Bruised Hibiscus* is that the story is sometimes crippled with an abundance of metaphoric description in moments when the reader simply wants to keep momentum of action and dialogue. It's like sitting by a campfire listening to an elder tell three stories within one to make a point" (Spencer 34). However, another reviewer praises this aspect of Nunez's writing and notes that she sets the story's pace at "slow and deliberate" to accurately portray the "domestic setting and the everyday challenges that couples face in their work and other relationships" (Denolyn 43).

Troubled relationships, whether between different genders, races, or socioeconomic classes, have a marked presence in the work of Elizabeth Nunez. Her experiences as a black woman in a foreign country have led her to probe the relationships people form through life's unexpected circumstances, and how politics and prejudices of both public and private lives can affect these bonds. In a literary sense, though, she's not that strong. She struggles with characterization and weak plots, and can't quite decide the kind of writer she wants to be - a commercial or a literary accomplishment.

Nunez examines these relationships with varying degrees of success. The complex and often rigid boundaries of marriage and families in post-colonial Trinidad are explored with great sensitivity in the novel *Bruised Hibiscus*. Extreme hate and violence feature prominently, yet she also speaks powerfully about the meaning of a family, and manages to unearth hope for functioning relationships despite differences.



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Major Critical Responses continued

Central to the more successful portrait of these lives in Trinidad is Nunez's connection to and understanding of the island and its people. Her vivid language provides a seductively descriptive backdrop to the plot, sharpening the contrast between the exotic beauty and mysticism often associated with the Caribbean and the disjointed, harsh events she creates. Nunez incorporates traditional cultural practices and beliefs, as in *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, into her characters' constant struggle to figure out who they are and what role they serve in their environment. An example of this is in *Limbo Silence* when the characters find themselves battling social barriers and stereotypes between their heritages as African Americans and Caribbean Americans and how those backgrounds make them similar, yet at the same time entirely separate. There is an underlying plot about the Civil Rights movement, and it is made very clear that the Caribbean Americans, while darker skinned, are discouraged from trying to relate to the plight of their African American kin.

Beyond the Limbo Silence was one of her strongest works, probably because the love story wasn't the main driving force of the novel. Nunez becomes a lot weaker when she focuses strictly on modern marital relationships, as in her novels *Grace* and *Discretion*. Melodramatic language and a tendency to keep the reader at arm's length from the characters prevent the relationships that Nunez bases her novels on from having resonance with the reader. A key example of how this fails is in *Grace*.

The decision to write *Grace* in the third person is the key downfall of the novel. Its constant "she said" and "he said" before every sentence creates a monotonous rhythm. It also leads to very inefficient prose - so much of the novel is spent explaining who is talking as opposed to the assumed narrator in a first person story. Personal emotions are also very difficult to explain in the third person, and so the reader has limited knowledge of each character's thoughts and feelings on the constantly intense issues. In *Grace*, we know that Sally is unhappy in her marriage, but we never really learn why because we are never able to see inside her head. Without this ability to see inside, the reader struggles to sympathize with or even care about the complexities of the characters' situations.



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Major Critical Responses continued

Discretion also falls victim to ineffective language. While Nunez's highly descriptive words served a critical role in defining the cultural backdrop in previous novels, in *Discretion* they come out flat and extremely forced. As the story focuses on a love triangle, Nunez attempts to create provocative sex scenes that illustrate the passion between the lovers. However, the language Nunez uses to create passion in these scenes evokes memories of worn paperback romance novels. Nunez uses phrases like, "the dark caverns of my fantasies," and the reader is left with a tawdry image that is anything but passionate. If she likes writing these kinds of things so much, perhaps she would do better devoting all her time to trashy love - her attempts to infuse it with literature ruins her credibility as an author.

Nunez succeeds, though, in the wide range of relationships she chooses to weave together throughout all of her novels. Initially, the choices she makes [in her characters] are more than enough for an interesting and engrossing plot. All the ingredients are there: love, deceit, confusion, passion, etc. It's just that Nunez hasn't quite decided on the best recipe to use. There are more effective ways of showing her characters' - and their relationships' - complexities than she has shown. The positives of her highly descriptive and emotional prose also have the ability to at the same time drown the prose in melodrama and confusion. She will ultimately succeed as an author, as long as she stops straddling the line and decides the genre she ultimately wants to write in: literature or pop culture.



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